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NEEDS OF DEAF PEOPLE IN THE SEVENTIES

LARRY G. STEWART, Ed.D.

The theme of this Convention, "Deafness in the Seventies: A Decade of Services in Depth," implies that in the past we have not been providing in depth services to deaf people; that we are concerned because we have not been able to provide better services; and that we are determined to make available the highest level of services possible during the next ten years. If these implications are accurate, and I suspect we all agree they are, then we need to find out what our shortcomings have been and what we need to do in the future to improve our performance.

The title of my talk is "The Needs of Deaf People in the Seventies." Perhaps I could talk for thirty minutes on the special needs of deaf people, such as the need for parent counseling, a "total communication" approach in education, vocational training facilities, adult education programs, community service agencies, and the like. Certainly these needs will exist in the 1970's just as they have always existed. However, I am confident that all of you are aware of these needs, and I do not want to waste your time repeating what you have already heard many times. Instead, I will review our past accomplishments and failures and suggest what we can do in the future to help deaf people meet their needs.

Activities in the 1960's

During the past decade the field of rehabilitation of the deaf was active in identifying the more pressing needs of deaf people, exchanging information concerning these needs, organizing national and local service programs to meet needs, and recruiting a greater number of professionals and paraprofessionals for the field.

There were many conferences, workshops, and task force meetings devoted to identifying and describing the needs of deaf people. In addition, many articles on the needs of the deaf were published and widely disseminated. The efforts were basic to the rehabilitation effort during the early and middle parts of the decade, and formed the foundation for most of the service innovations that were to follow.

Our exchange of information concerning the needs of deaf people was excellent. Through the *Journal of Rehabilitation of the Deaf*, the *Deaf American*, and numerous publications distributed by the Social and Rehabilitation Service, we were able to learn more about the problems and needs of deaf people. This knowledge was shared with many professionals and laymen as well.

Perhaps our greatest gains were made in the realm of organizing specific programs for the deaf. Many examples come readily to mind, including the establishment of our own organization, the Professional Rehabilitation Workers With the Adult Deaf; the Council of Organizations Serving the Deaf; the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf; the National Sign Language Program; the regional vocational-technical programs for the deaf; the International Research Seminar on the Vocational Rehabilitation of Deaf Persons; community service agencies and rehabilitation center programs for deaf people, and many others.

During the first few years of the 1960's there were only a handful of special counselors for the deaf with State agencies, but by 1970 most State agencies had such counselors. New university training programs to prepare rehabilitation workers with the deaf were established. Several rehabilitation centers initiated new programs for the deaf. These few examples exemplify the tremendous growth of our young profession during the past ten years.

How, we may ask, were these developments achieved, and how can we ensure the continuing expansion and refinement of our programs? There were many factors involved, of course, including new national trends in vocational rehabilitation, broader legislation and funding, and increased local interest and involvement. Perhaps the most important factor, however, was the involvement and commitment of our leaders. If you look around you, you can

identify these leaders. These people struggled with almost insurmountable obstacles, and were it not for their total commitment to their tasks it is doubtful if such gains would have been made.

We were fortunate in that we had the individuals in our field to provide the leadership in our efforts to push back the barriers that restrained us. Most importantly, the Social and Rehabilitation Service provided us with solid support on every front. Without SRS and the people who represent it, opportunities for deaf people would certainly be bleak today.

We need now to turn to what we have not done for deaf people, and why we have not accomplished these things. First, and perhaps foremost, we have not worked together to develop a list of national priorities in the rehabilitation of deaf people. We have never reached a consensus on what our most pressing needs are and how we are going to overcome them. Perhaps we have not recognized this as our responsibility; perhaps we have never even thought of making such a priority listing; perhaps we have looked to others to accomplish this. Regardless of the reason, we as a professional group must look at the needs of deaf people and decide on what we are going to do about them.

For example, what are our needs in the way of manpower? What do we need to do to recruit more manpower, and how are we going to go about doing whatever it is we must do? Again, what rehabilitation programs for the deaf does our country need? How are we going to ensure that these programs are developed? These are just two of the issues we should look at.

We have known for a long time that the average reading achievement level of deaf school leavers has been at a level precluding post-secondary training in training schools that emphasize verbal communication. We have known that approximately 50 per cent of deaf people do not have ready access to appropriate post-secondary school training opportunities. There are permanent training facilities for perhaps only the top 20 per cent of deaf youth. Why have we been so slow to demand a Gallaudet College or National Technical Institute for the Deaf for the group of deaf people who achieve at the 5th grade level or lower? Perhaps we have just reacted like most Americans, thinking we should con-

concentrate on encouraging the development of our best minds; perhaps we have not thought much about the whole matter; or, perhaps we have just figured someone else would do something.

We have seen several rehabilitation programs and at least one community service agency for the deaf discontinue services after Federal funding ceased. Have we taken the trouble to learn from the mistakes made by these programs so that we would avoid the same mistakes again? Do you know, for example, why the Kansas City Community Service Agency for the Deaf and Boston rehabilitation project for the deaf were not continued? These are perhaps sore spots to some of us, but lessons from failures are valuable.

Our university graduate programs have not been producing enough graduates to meet our manpower needs. Why has this happened, and what are we doing to remedy the situation? Perhaps we figure someone else will do the job, or perhaps we have not felt we could do anything about it. Maybe we haven't even thought beyond the fact that there are just not enough workers to go around.

The research we have been doing represents another shortcoming. Studies conducted at Michael Reese Hospital and Medical Center and at the New York State Psychiatric Institute were excellent, but we have not had enough research of this calibre. We do not know enough about the effects of our service efforts in terms of changes in client functioning. Until we can evaluate our own work, we cannot hope to develop better rehabilitation methods. Why haven't we been doing more research? Is it because we have a view of research as something done in test tubes in a laboratory, or is it because we are afraid we may find that our profession has the same shortcomings evidenced by the field of education of the deaf.

We have not seemed to be too concerned about ongoing professional development and contributing to the body of knowledge on rehabilitation theory and practice with deaf people. We have had workshops and institutes on the problems and needs of the deaf, but very few institutes where our most experienced workers have shared their knowledge of service approaches with those less experienced. Further, too much of our literature has been provincial and circular. We have talked about deafness without reference to

existing theory; we have written articles on counseling the deaf that appeared more concerned with reasons why we can't counsel with deaf people rather than with what counseling with them is like. I am not sure why we have allowed this to happen, but I suspect we have been waiting for the other guy to do it.

Finally, we have not been involved enough in the education of the deaf. Our organization has no position paper on educational practices with deaf children and youth. Yet, we are all aware of how much a sound education means to the deaf individual. Perhaps we have felt that rehabilitation is our business and we should leave education to educators. Or, perhaps we have contented ourselves with individual potshots at education, without enough of the involvement that is necessary to effect real change.

Action for the Future

What about the needs of the deaf in the seventies? Shouldn't we be talking about more community service agencies for the deaf, more vocational training opportunities, more adult education programs, and such? My answer is that the time for talking about these needs is past. We are acutely aware of these needs, and if any of us are not we should be. What we must do at this Convention, and in the future, is to plan and carry out action proposals to meet the needs of deaf people as we understand them now. If we can develop a large-scale problem-solving approach now we can be assured of having a mechanism for dealing with new needs as they occur.

Throughout my remarks I have suggested, both implicitly and explicitly, that "we" should be involved in shaping theory and practice in the rehabilitation of deaf people. By "we" I mean each one of us. We have among us some of the most creative and productive minds in the entire field of rehabilitation. Too, workers with deaf people have always been noted for their commitment to hard work. Yet, it appears that too many of us have remained silent when the need to be heard has been greatest. Like education of the deaf, our field is faced with many controversial issues. We are aware of injustices that exist for deaf people; we know that too often they have been given second class services; we know deaf consumers of services have been often-neglected by the agencies that supposedly serve them. Yet, only a few of us have raised our voice in protest.

As with other groups, we have among us our share of radicals and mavericks who seek immediate and extensive change in our ways of helping deaf people. We also have our share of conservatives who shout that we should cut down on our services in order that the deaf may stand on their own feet. Yet, the majority of us have remained silent and uninvolved. Whitney Young, Executive Director of the National Urban League, remarked at the recent National Citizens Conference on Rehabilitation of the Disabled and Disadvantaged:

The problem in America today is not the problem of either the bigot or the so ca-called revolutionary liberal. The problem in America is that large blob of people who fall in between; that nice silent group who have distinguished themselves by their irrelevance and by not wanting to hurt feelings. If you are going to save lives, rather than feelings, you have to speak out.

Do these remarks apply to those who serve deaf people and to deaf people themselves? I will leave this for you to answer. We know many of our service programs are mediocre, but we remain silent. Deaf citizens and tax payers know they should be receiving more services from their tax money, but they generally have not made their needs known. Many of us, professionals and laymen alike, are aware that the majority of teacher training programs in the area of deafness have practiced the unwritten policy of excluding deaf students from their programs and have been openly biased against manual communication. The U. S. Office of Education funds most teacher training programs in deafness education, and has implicitly condoned these practices. Have we objected loudly enough to these outright injustices to the deaf people we serve?

More and more agencies that serve the deaf are turning to consumers - deaf people themselves - for guidance in development of policies and practices that concern the deaf. Yet until recently representation of the deaf community has been absent in the activities and administration of the U.S. Office of Education. What have we as a group or as individuals done to protest these practices?

To summarize, I believe we have accomplished a great deal for deaf people in our country over the past ten years. Through the commitment and involvement of professionals and laymen, and the solid backing of the Social and Rehabilitation Service, our profession has been able to come close to bridging the tremendous gap that exists between the quality of services for hearing people and services for deaf people. At the same time we have been limited in our success because there were not enough of us to see that needed changes were made. We have worked more or less in isolation; up to this time we have never come together to look at where we have been, where we are now, where we want to go in the future, how we are going to get there, who is going to carry the ball, and who is going to do the blocking.

The decade of the seventies will be a challenging era. There will be many national and international problems for our country. In our own profession we are going to need more and better workers; more and better training opportunities and support services for our clients. Deaf people are going to live in a world that becomes more complex and demanding each year, while at the same time they are going to have greater adjustment problems because of disabilities associated with their deafness. There have never been simple and clear cut solutions to the needs of deaf people. These needs will continue to change as times and people change. Because deafness imposes such severe handicaps upon individuals, they are much more dependent upon others in acquiring independence. We can provide the type of helping relationship deaf people need only by committing ourselves personally and professionally to working together and with our clients in the achievement of mutual goals.